The Disabled Ramblers Access Campaigning Report 2019

In addition to running rambles, volunteer members of the Disabled Ramblers campaign for improved access to the countryside. This work has been going on since the group was formed in 1998 and, sadly, much still needs to be done to raise awareness of barriers that have been put – and continue to be put - in the way of legitimate users of our Public Rights of Way network. Several committee members represent the Disabled Ramblers at a national level while many other members do so in their local area. We thank them all for their time and expertise.

Although our volunteers give their time freely, the Disabled Ramblers do offer to cover expenses incurred in this work even though it is a big use of our limited funds.

All donations welcome!

Some examples of our work in 2019:

Firstly, we must thank all our Ramble Leaders who work closely with Land Managers & Owners to ensure their rambles are viable and any obstructions removed. Often, Rangers or Wardens accompany us on our rambles which raises their awareness of the capabilities of our members.

Our Leaders in 2019 were:

Judy & Bernard Cunningham,
Val Rawlings & Bob McLellan,
Paula Brunt,
Steve Wilson,
Linda Rivers,
Gordon Guest,
James Babington Smith,
Lucy Savage & John Birmingham and
Ian Preddy

Preparing for the 2020 rambles during 2019 were:

Arthur Lee,
Hugh & Jill Williamson,
Judy & Bernard Cunningham,
Mark & Bee de Rivaz and
Paula & Pete Brunt.
Arthur Lee represents the Disabled Ramblers on many national and local committees and working groups. These include:

Natural England’s National Land Access Centre;
Outdoors for All working group;
SUSTRANS ‘Paths for All’ project;
MOD Access Forum;
National Access Forum Wales;
Rights of Way Review Committee;
Motor Vehicles Working Group;
Malvern Hills AONB Joint Advisory Committee;
Herefordshire Local Access Forum chairman;
Herefordshire Ramblers chairman;
Hereford Ramblers secretary.

Arthur Lee instructing a member of Natral England’s staff in the use of his Tramper at the National Land Access Centre

SUSTRANS Chief Executive Xavier Brice (in red coat) at a ‘Paths for All’ meeting Birmingham as a user-group member from The Canals & Rivers Trust tells of some of the improvement works being carried out on the canal network

Barriers along the canal in Reading will be removed soon thanks to local pressure from Margaret Pawson and the SUSTRANS ‘Paths for All’ Project
Tom Bindoff originally came up with the idea of a **National Land Access Centre** and this was established at the Aston Rowant National Nature Reserve, opening in September 2018. The Centre has excellent support from the team of Managers and Volunteers at the Reserve and Natural England Headquarters staff and has hosted visits from several groups during 2019 including **The National Trust, Forestry England and the England Coastal Path team**. Tom has long been a champion of **Access for All** to the countryside and, together with Chris Beney, Chair of the working group which has carried out revisions of the British Standard for Gaps, Gates and Stiles (BS 5709), has run 15 training courses at the Centre showing how the principle of using the ‘Least Restrictive Option’ can be put into practice. In addition, Tom and Chris (who is also Chairman of the Open Spaces Society) have run courses off-site during the year including a presentation at the annual conference of the **North Cotswolds AONB Volunteer Wardens**. The Centre aims to demonstrate what best practice in relation to **Access for All** looks like. Most of the gates have been provided by **Centrewire Ltd**, the company which manufactures many of the accessible gates we find in the countryside. The Centre will be able to test new and improved gate designs and aims to contribute to a general improvement in access across the whole UK.

**Arthur Lee & Tom Bindoff advising Lord Blencathra, Deputy chairman of Natural England at the National Land Access Centre.**
Ian Lawson focuses on access in the North York Moors National Park where he is a member of the NPA’s Disability Advisory Group, lobbying for an increased budget for maintaining the 6 easy access paths that the park has. He has also challenged the NPA over their Business Plan 2016 - 2021 commitment, to increase easy access routes by 5 km every year, which they have failed to honour due to a lack of budget.

Early in 2019 Ian spent a lot of time identifying routes and potential locations for Trampers for public use in the National Park and now there are Trampers for hire from Sutton Bank Visitor Centre and the National Trust at Ravenscar.

A large project Ian worked on was assisting and promoting the Land of Iron project. This included a video of a Tramper going around the West Kilns in Rosedale, and still photos of a Tramper on the new Lion Inn to East Kilns easy access path, to go into their "Out & About 2020" magazine and website.

In other work, Ian raises concerns over maintenance and safety issues on easy access and other accessible routes. He also attended meetings and lobbied those involved over the Cinder Track restoration and the Forge Valley Board walk restoration.

In the last year to 18 months Ian has contacted 2 water boards, who both responded positively by installing accessible gates, removed steps and laid board walks around 2 reservoirs.

Ian says, “My message to DR members is simple: contact, then assist, National Parks and your local authorities to take accessibility more seriously. All public bodies have a Public Sector Equality Duty to – ‘a public authority must…. advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it” (section 149 Equality Act)’. I am willing to bet that, if you ask them, most local authority officers are completely unaware of their legal duty to the disabled community.”
Steve Wilson is our Regional Rep for Cornwall. In addition, Steve is chairman of the Cornwall Rolling Ramblers. Steve’s access work in Cornwall sees him attending at least one meeting a month. He regularly meets with Cornwall County Council staff where he is a member of their Countryside Access Forum.

Site meetings with Natural England, Cornwall C C, the National Trust and others in 2019 have included:

- advising on improving the path between Gyllingvase & Swanpool beaches near Falmouth,
- a bridge at Marazion and path improvements
- a new bridge at Godrevy for the England Coast Path.
- checking out the accessibility of the grounds at Trebah Gardens.

As part of WAGs (Dartmoor Wheelchair Access group), he has been involved in finding accessible routes on Dartmoor, particularly for use in the Dartmoor walking Festival.

Main projects with the National Trust this year have focused around Penrose, Godrevy, Trelissick and North Cliffs near Tehidy Country Park with at least one site visit to each.

Access work by the National Trust at North Cliffs. Many thanks to them

Old gate removed and path rebuilt
Marian & Barry Andrews met with Tony Blackledge, Greenspace Officer for Cheshire West and Chester Council to discuss access at the Weaver Parkway. Tony was keen to identify where access could be improved which they did by rambling round the Parkway with him in August. As a result, a broken Radar padlock was replaced on one gate and a short piece of access path was created to link a track to a Radar-key operated kissing gate.

News of the improvements appeared on the council website and in the local paper:

https://www.yourwestcheshire.co.uk/NewsArticle/%7B65B2FC82-24BA-4B12-B7EC-7596DB9153F3%7D

In September Marian & Barry attempted to ramble the seven-mile circular Alwen Trail near Cerrigydrudion in North Wales only to be thwarted after 4 miles by two kissing gates with Radar key locks that were totally inoperable. They contacted Welsh Water, who promote the trail, who in turn contacted Natural Resources Wales. NRW promptly sent out a team to replace the locks and when Marian & Barry revisited the trail in October all gates were accessible.
Val Rawlings and Bob McLellan are our Regional Reps for Hampshire and Sussex.

Recently a new bridge was installed over the Lymington River in Roydon Woods Nature Reserve, nr Lymington, Hampshire. Unfortunately, the gap between the bridge and the ground has not been finished properly. As you can see, a few rocks have been inserted to try to fill the gap but it is still too dangerous for most scooter users to cross. The bridge is close to a narrow section of path with a dangerous edge. Val and Bob are now in the process of contacting the owners to ask for this to be rectified.

At Rye Harbour, Val & Bob had a meeting with James Duncan of Sussex Wildlife Trust for a reccy ramble to assess if it was suitable for a DR ramble later in the summer of 2019. There was a good result and a ramble was arranged.

Not all work out though. A reccy at Woods Mill Nature Reserve, West Sussex, again with James Duncan, Sussex Wildlife Trust, found on completion of reccy that this venue wasn't suitable for a DR ramble as it was not large enough.

Val & Bob had several meetings in 2019 with the New Forest National Park Authority staff:

They met with Adam Vasey, New Forest National Park Access Ranger, Gareth Owen - Interpretation & Outreach Officer NFNPA and Suzi Shilling, Communications Assistant, to discuss accessible routes in the New Forest and offered to help in any way they can with historic routes.

Again meeting with Adam Vasey & Suzi Shilling (recording the route on camera) they checked a 3-mile accessible route for inclusion in ‘Miles without Stiles’ information for visitors to the New Forest.

After a reccy of Rockford Common in the New Forest, it is now planned to repeat the route with Gareth Owen while it is videoed.

For the New Forest Walking Festival, Val & Bob ran two rambles which were well supported by members of the Disabled Ramblers.
Val & Bob also do a lot of work with the South Downs National Park:

For the South Downs National Park ‘Miles without Stiles’ & ‘Heathlands Reunited’ schemes, they met Beth Nicholls, Heathlands Reunited Communities Outreach Officer, South Downs NPA for a recce ramble to assess route suitability for disabled and possible inclusion in ‘Miles without Stiles’ scheme.

Val, Bob & David Leadbetter had a meeting with South Downs NPA photographer Sam Moore at the request of Rebecca Saunders, Communications Officer, SDNPA to assess the suitability of a route for inclusion into ‘Miles without Stiles’ project and give advice on any improvements needed. The route was very good and hopefully the Disabled Ramblers will feature on yet another leaflet published by the South Downs National Park Authority.

Chris Southwood is in discussion with a Conservation Officer from Leicestershire and Rutland Wildlife Trust about improving access to more of their reserves. Sadly, the weather got in the way of their first planned meeting which has now been put back until spring. Chris says, “Your report will be a helpful addition to the discussion and hopefully I’ll have something positive to say for 2020”.

Judy & Bernard Cunningham are working with Warwickshire Wildlife Trust at Brandon Marsh near Coventry where they have surveyed a new area of the site for its suitability to have a Tramper route. They are assisting with the Trust’s bid for funds and the Centre hopes to have a Tramper in place this year.

Nicola West is on the consultation group for the A417 missing link project (dualling the section around the Air Balloon pub and Crickley Hill in the Cotswolds AONB), and, through this, is now a member of the Gloucestershire LAF. Nic says, “They were very pleased to have a disabled rambler on board and I'm hoping that I'll be able to make some useful contributions.”

Simon Burn has met with Wiltshire Wildlife Trust and they have agreed to replace the two standard wooden kissing gates in Smallbrook Meadows in Warminster, Wiltshire, with Large Mobility (RADAR) ones in 2020.
Ron & Chris Lyon are our Regional Reps for Cumbria. They sit on local access forums to improve access for all: the Cumbria and the Lakes Local Access Forum (CALLAF) and the Warcop M.O.D shooting range access liaison group. They have advised North Pennines AONB on possible ways to develop better access in general.

Some Lake District National Park Authority rangers have been “trained to use their eyes” to recognise access problems such as sideways camber and ruts on tracks.

Ron & Chris advise local National Trust sites on how they can improve access on existing paths.

Working with the Coniston Coppermines Development Project, an informative leaflet has been produced showing the Disabled Ramblers categories of difficulty and advising on which type of scooter will be safe to use on the various routes around the site.

Ron & Chris have been working with the Morecambe Bay Partnership for some years to advise on possible Tramper routes. This project has now gone live and some routes have been established with Tramper hire points.
Eileen Scannell, in 2015, worked with Paul Clark, the Chairman of the North Cotswold Voluntary Wardens, to open up a 9-mile accessible ramble from Winchcombe in the Cotswolds. It has taken four years to come to fruition involving four new gates, a bridge and landowner permission for new access through a hedge. It was finally opened to the public in June 2019. Several members took part in the inaugural ramble and subsequent filming.

Eileen (left) with Paul (in high-viz) on our Winchcombe Regional Ramble in 2015

Andy Jaynes during BBC filming of the new 9-mile easy access ramble at Winchcombe.
Gordon Guest is our Regional Rep for Devon and is involved with numerous access issues in the area. In 2017, Gordon was invited by Wessex Water to report on improvements needed to make the path around Clatworthy Reservoir accessible. Over the last two years they first improved the fords and now have by-passed them with wide bridges. They brought in diggers to level off the parts of the route and removed a length of severe cross-slope. Gates and cattle grids have been removed.

Following several site visits with managers of Clinton Estates to Pebblebed Heaths and Woodbury Common (Near Exmouth), access has been improved from their car parks by cutting gaps into the surrounding bunds and improvements made to make it possible to reach the Iron-Age Fort. Further visits and improvements are planned for the coming years.

Killerton House NT to Broadclyst cycle path. There is a good scooter and cycle path from Killerton House to Broadclyst; part of it is on local roads. However, there was no drop kerb onto the road section. After several years of Gordon asking, in 2019 a drop kerb was installed making the route a good level 1 or 2 for mobility scooters and fully accessible along its entire length.

Devon County Council (DCC) footpaths department were doing some upgrade work on the TARKA Trail and Granite Way at road junctions. This is National Cycle Network (NCN) Route 27, the complete 102-mile route of which runs between Ilfracombe on the north Devon coast to Plymouth on the south coast. The trail is an old railway line, now a tarmac cycle path. At places, the cycle path crosses roads. At these junctions DCC were installing new chicanes to slow cycles but needed to know sizes for scooters and space for visibility splays. As a result of site visits by Gordon they were doing a redesign so that Tramper type scooters could easily get through the chicanes and have plenty of space to wait off the road until safe to cross.

Bellevor Forest, Postbridge Dartmoor is jointly managed by Dartmoor National Park and Forestry England (what was the Forestry Commission). During 2019, some work was undertaken to improve mobility scooter access. This was helpful but substantially more needs to be done, particularly as Postbridge and Bellevor are high volume tourist locations. Both locations have car parks and toilets and are at either end of the forest. There are extensive walking trails advertised on Forestry England Website. There are few routes accessible by off-road scooters and no information on easier wheelchair routes for less robust scooters. Despite Gordon attending lots of discussion and site meetings, very little progress in wheelchair accessibility is being made.

Fingle Glen, Dartmoor, is an extensive woodland site alongside the river Teign on Dartmoor. It is a very popular tourist attraction. Road access is very difficult as is car parking. The Woodland Trust and National Trust have worked jointly to improve wheelchair access. They have regraded and levelled the riverside path. They have improved wheelchair / Tramper access on paths from the river up the hill to the Iron Age Fort and created access into the fort. Gordon and Steve Wilson have attended several site visits and met with
representatives who are helpful, supportive and keen to improve access within the limitations of the site. Work here is ongoing.

The Dartmoor Walking Festival is an annual Dartmoor event organised by Moorland Guides. In 2019, Gordon and Steve Wilson organised 8 days of mobility scooter walks as part of the festival. The Disabled Ramblers included the walks as part of their annual programme. This was very successful with some 15 to 20 scooters on each walk plus friends, family, carers and dogs. Disabled Ramblers members made up a great number of the participants. This was a success and further walks are planned for 2020. The challenge is to get information out to local people and get more local people who use mobility scooters involved.

Countryside Mobility, based in Exeter, have some 60 sites where Tramper scooters can be hired. Many of these sites are in Devon and Cornwall. There is regular contact between Gordon, Steve Wilson and Countryside Mobility to discuss access improvements.

Rhiannon Robinson noticed that the consultation period on the proposed route of the England Coast Path was drawing near for the section from Aust to Brean Down. Rhiannon walked almost the whole stretch, noting and photographing obstructions to scooters and wheelchairs. She then submitted detailed responses to the ten sectors involved.

Rhiannon is now working closely with the Project Team from Natural England who are leading the work on the England Coast Path.

Rhiannon and John Cuthbertson have met with Clair Horten, head of the DEFRA Access Team, Neil Constable, Programme Manager of the England Coast Path and Tess Jackson, Natural England’s Partnership Manager for Southern England. At the meeting, John gave his presentation which shows some of the man-made barriers we have to overcome together with photos of our members crossing all sorts of terrain which, to most people, appear to be impossible for mobility scooters. Neil now has a much better understanding of the capabilities and aspirations of the disabled and is looking to ensure all his team have this understanding.

Rhiannon is now helping the team to decide on how best to waymark the routes which are suitable for wheelchairs and mobility scooters.

Rhiannon is a member of the North Somerset Local Access Forum.
Paula Brunt stepped in at short notice to give interviews on the *East Midlands News* and *Radio Nottingham* after barriers appeared across some entrances to *Sherwood Forest*, preventing access to the disabled.

She, with husband Pete, attended a meeting of the *National Access Forum Wales* in Cardiff. This forum meets three times a year to discuss how to improve Access for All across Wales.

Paula, Pete and Arthur Lee attended a *Westminster Briefing* where the representatives of outdoor user groups had the opportunity to hear the Government’s latest thinking on changing the Planning System to encouraging *Biodiversity Net Gain*.

Paula and Pete attended a meeting of the Ridgeway Partnership. Paula is taking over as the rep for the Disabled Ramblers from John Cuthbertson.

At a meeting to discuss access and safety on *Salisbury Plain*, Paula, Pete, Val Rawlings and Bob McLellan met James Nevitt, Senior Access & Recreation Advisor, MOD, & Jeff Elson the Training Safety Officer. As a result, access to *Copehill Down* was granted during our ramble there.

Copehill Down (often called the ‘German Village’) is a Ministry of Defence training facility near Chitterne on Salisbury Plain. It is a ‘FIBUA’ (Fighting In Built Up Areas) urban warfare and close quarters battle training centre where exercises and tests are conducted.

Paula has attended a meeting of *Hampshire LAF* and plans to join once they have found a new chairman!

*Paula enjoying the delights of Salisbury Plain*
John Cuthbertson gives Talks & Presentations to Local Access Forums and all who wish to know more about our Access Needs. In 2019 this included the England Coast Path Team, the Outdoor Recreation Network, the North Cotswolds AONB Volunteer Wardens and the Surrey Coalition of Disabled People.

John represents disabled people on Worcestershire LAF the Malvern Hills Trust Recreation Advisory Panel and the Ridgeway Partnership. He has written several Letters of Support to assist organisation in various Grant Applications for projects to improve access. He usually gives the first response to the access queries which come to the Disabled Ramblers via our web site.

John at the opening of the National Land Access Centre